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Eliot Murder in the cathedral
(T. S. Eliot)

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MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL

GENERAL NOTE

This series of introductions to the great classics of English literature is designed primarily for the school, college, and university student, although it is hoped that they will be found helpful by a much larger audience. Three aims have been kept in mind:

(A) To give the reader the relevant information necessary for his fuller understanding of the work.

(B) To indicate the main areas of critical interest, to suggest suitable critical approaches, and to point out possible critical difficulties.

(C) To do this in as simple and lucid a manner as possible, avoiding technical jargon and giving a full explanation of any critical terms employed.

Each introduction contains questions on the text and suggestions for further reading. It should be emphasized that in so sense is any introduction to be considered as a substitute for the reader's own study, understanding, and appreciation of the work.

Notes on English Literature

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MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL

(T. S. ELIOT)

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Eliot
Mason



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CONTENTS

I. Poetic Drama.. .. .	1
II. The Historical Background	7
III. The Triple Theme	17
1. The Personal Element.. ..	17
2. The Nature of Martyrdom	23
3. The Spiritual Malaise	28
IV. The Four Tempters.. .. .	34
V. The Knights	41
VI. Dramatic Technique	49
VII. The Chorus	55
VIII. The Verse	60
General	72

I. POETIC DRAMA

- (i) People have tended to think of verse as a restriction upon drama. They think that the emotional range, and the realistic truth, of drama is limited and circumscribed by verse. People were once content with verse in drama, they say, because they were content with a restricted and artificial range of emotion. Only prose can give the full gamut of modern feeling, can correspond to actuality. But is not every dramatic representation artificial? And are we not merely deceiving ourselves when we aim at greater and greater realism? Are we not contenting ourselves with appearances, instead of insisting upon fundamentals? Has human feeling altered much from Aeschylus to ourselves? I maintain the contrary. I say that prose drama is merely a slight by-product of verse drama. The human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse. It is not for me, but for the neurologists, to discover why this is so, and why and how feeling and rhythm are related. The tendency, at any rate, of prose drama is to emphasise the ephemeral and superficial; if we want to get at the permanent and universal we tend to express ourselves in verse.

[Eliot: *A Dialogue On Dramatic Poetry* (1928)]

- (ii) It is possible that what distinguishes poetic drama from prosaic drama is a kind of doubleness in the action, as if it took place on two planes at once. In this it is different from allegory, in which the

abstraction is something conceived, not something differently felt, and from symbolism (as in the plays of Maeterlinck) in which the tangible world is deliberately diminished—both symbolism and allegory being operations of the conscious planning mind. In poetic drama a certain apparent irrelevance may be the symptom of this doubleness; or the drama has an under-pattern, less manifest than the theatrical one.

[Eliot: *John Marston* (1934)]

Drama began in ritual. We may equally truly say that it began in rhythm. For whether we think of the origin of drama in the choric dithyrambs of Dionysian fertility cults or in the Easter ceremony of the medieval Church, we find this common element of ritual and of an ordered pattern which is the essence of rhythm.

But the story of the development of drama, both in Greece and in England, is one of increasing secularization. By the end of the 16th century the theatre in England was wholly divorced from the Church, but the tradition (the convention, if you like) of verse still prevailed. Why, then, did verse drama fail to persist after the close of the century which had seen the achievements of Shakespeare and his Jacobean successors? This is a large and interesting question, the answer to which need not concern us here, but it is one well worth thinking about, for it is closely connected with the whole social, literary and intellectual life of the English people. A question hardly less interesting and more relevant to our purpose is 'Why did all attempts to revive poetic drama in the 19th century fail so completely?'

With the possible exception of *The Cenci* by Shelley not one of the dramas written by poets of the Romantic period or of the 19th century stands the least chance of revival (other than by a literary coterie). Why should poets as talented in their different ways as Arnold, Browning and Tennyson write such frigid or verbose failures as *Merope*, *Strafford* and *Becket*? First it can be said that they were writing at a time unpropitious for drama of any worth. The theatre was under a cloud of disfavour. Neither from the Court nor from the middle-class was there that enthusiastic support that Shakespeare and his seventeenth century successors could count on. The moral reaction against Restoration licentiousness lasted long and was reinforced by the evangelical movement of the second half of the eighteenth century and the theatre was looked on by many as the Devil's playhouse. Romanticism, with its *culte du moi*, is basically antithetical to an art form essentially social as is drama. Creative genius, such as that of Dickens, was turned from drama to the novel.

When all this has been admitted, however, there is a second main reason for the failure of all these poets to write successful poetic drama. It has been put this way: 'But for Shakespeare we might have had poetic drama.' You see the implication? All the poets failed to realize that the poetic idiom of one age will not serve for vital poetic drama in another. Further, they thought of Shakespeare as 'clothing' his play in fine sounding language and missed the truth that *Othello* or *King Lear* is conceived as a poetic whole. To adopt a nice distinction formulated by Cocteau, they failed to recognize the difference between 'poésie de théâtre' and 'poésie au théâtre'.

It is not surprising, therefore, that when the drama came again into life, it was not a revival of poetic drama. Under the impact of Ibsen and his disciple Shaw it was naturalistic or representational, concerning itself with social problems or intellectual argument.

How, then, was Eliot able to write a play in verse that was not only successful in itself but also capable of initiating a revival of poetic drama (however short-lived that revival may prove to have been)? A sentence in the first of the quotations at the head of this section pin-points the answer: 'The human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse.' Appropriate verse, then, adding rhythm to language, is a means to intensification of expression, an aim common to all art. In the martyrdom of Becket Eliot had a subject perfectly fitted for treatment in verse. As he admits (*Poetry and Drama*), his subject matter was 'about some remote historical period, far enough away from the present for the characters not to need to be recognizable as human beings, (isn't this going a bit too far?) and therefore for them to be licensed to talk in verse.' But there are reasons beyond this and beyond his slightly condescending addition that 'Picturesque period costume renders verse more acceptable.' and that the play 'was to be produced for a rather special kind of audience.' *Murder in the Cathedral* is a religious play. Not because it is about an Archbishop who is killed, but because it is about man's relationship to God. Imagined with intense emotion it demands expression in heightened speech and that brings us to a further reason for its success. In vocabulary, idiom and rhythm the language of the play is wholly of our time. And it is always dramatically

relevant. Thomas, the Tempters, the Knights all speak in verse that perfectly expresses what they are; and the choric passages are always modulated to the changing experience of the Chorus. This is where Eliot and Shakespeare come together. Think of Hamlet's soliloquy beginning 'O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I.' and see how the violence of his self-disgust is translated into verse contorted with passion; of the extravagance of Antony's

'Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch
Of the rang'd empire fall.'

to match the extravagance of his infatuation; of the measured verse that matches the serenity of Prospero's 'Our revels now are ended'. In Eliot and Shakespeare alike the dramatic moment is realized in the verse itself.

There is another aspect of poetic drama which merits consideration. Whilst it is true that some prose drama (Chehov's *The Cherry Orchard* is a case in point) can suggest levels of reference beyond the immediate one of the dramatic action, it seems that only through poetry can the deep reserves of significance in myth or religion be tapped in drama. It is difficult to say why this is so. Partly it may be that rhythm acts somewhat after the manner of hypnosis, effecting a kind of psychic release; partly it may be because in myth and religion we apprehend reality in a manner, not wholly intellectual and therefore need a cognate mode of expression in a play which embodies myth or religion. And that mode is metaphor or imagery—the essence of poetry.

Closely connected with this function of poetic

drama, the simultaneous revelation of several planes of reality, is the point made by Eliot in the second of the epigraphs to this section. The total dramatic conception of *Murder in The Cathedral* is not bounded by the representation of the killing of Thomas or even by his finding the true path of martyrdom. It comprehends the significance of martyrdom for the Church. His play, therefore, has the under-pattern of the spiritual progress of the Chorus. It is difficult to see how this could have been made manifest other than by the verse of the Chorus. Moreover, as we shall see when thinking more particularly about the Chorus, this 'kind of doubleness in the action' is never separate from the primary action, but absolutely integrated with it. As in the plays of Shakespeare's maturity, the poetry fulfils the drama.

Further reading: T. S. Eliot: *A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry*; *Four Elizabethan Dramatists (Selected Essays)*; R. Williams: *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*.

Questions:

1. 'The world of a great poetic dramatist is a world in which the creator is everywhere present, and everywhere hidden.' Develop and illustrate this paradox.
2. Do you think that some subjects are inherently more suitable than others for poetic drama?
3. 'The dramatist who is not a poet is so much less a dramatist.' Write Shaw's reply.
4. 'All drama depends on conventions.' Develop an essay justifying verse as a dramatic convention. [Apart from the essays of Eliot referred to above you will find helpful Yeats's *The Cutting of An Agate* (1912).]

II. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Thomas Becket was born on December 21st, 1118, son of a London Merchant of Norman origin. His early instruction was from Robert, Prior of Merton, who remained his counsellor and friend and was probably a witness of his death. Thomas, though never a great scholar, soon showed an aptitude for learning and in 1143 was taken into the circle of promising young men around Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury. This was almost at the height of the anarchy that marked 'the nineteen long winters' of the reign of Stephen (1135-1154) when it was said that 'Christ and his saints slept'. These clerks of the archbishop's household were a group of young men especially skilled in Roman and canon law. Thomas, who had already been to the University of Paris and was a little later to study jurisprudence at Bologna and Auxerre, would engage with his fellow 'Cantuarienses' in endless discussion and argument on points of law, theology and topics of the day. No doubt his interest in law combined with his knowledge of what the country suffered in time of anarchy to make him vigorous in supporting the new King's administration of justice when, in 1155, Henry II appointed him Chancellor.

In the years of his Chancellorship Becket displayed such vigour, thoroughness and ability that had his fame as churchman and martyr not drawn attention away from his administrative and diplomatic skill he would have been remembered as 'the great minister of a great king'. In everything he did there was the mark of a man of forceful personality wholly immersed

in worldly matters. When a case involved the conflicting interests of church and state, Becket never hesitated to show himself on the King's side. Many preferments came his way and he enjoyed many lucrative feudal rights. With ample revenues, not all of them scrupulously obtained, he sported with the King in all the pride of a courtier. His whole manner of life, whether in London or on his several excursions, diplomatic and military, on the Continent showed him as 'a vain, obstinate and ambitious man who sought always to keep himself in the public eye'.¹

He seems to have had no illusions about the nature of his young master (Henry II was fifteen years his junior). When someone spoke of him as the Archbishop to be, Becket replied: 'I know there are three poor priests in England, any one of whom I had rather see promoted to the archbishopric than myself, for I know my lord the King so intimately, that I am sure I should have to choose between his favour and that of Almighty God, if I myself were appointed.'

Even if this anecdote is apocryphal, there is no doubt that Becket was most reluctant to become the successor of Theobald who died in 1161. When Henry expressed his wish that the Chancellor should become Archbishop, Becket warned him: 'I am certain that if, by God's disposal, it were to happen, the love and favour you now bear me would speedily turn into bitterest hatred.' Nevertheless, expressly at Henry's wish, he was elected to the See of Canterbury in May 1162.

What was Henry's purpose in making Becket Archbishop of Canterbury? To answer this we must

¹ A. L. Poole, *From Domesday Book to Magna Carta*, p. 198.

remember that in the twelfth century, indeed throughout the Middle Ages, there was a continual struggle between the state and the church. Much was involved: prestige, authority, revenue-power. The Church had the advantage of its historical continuity and its spiritual sanctions. In times of little learning it was the storehouse of knowledge. It touched men's lives from baptism to burial. The withdrawal of its protection by excommunication and interdict was a sanction that not even kings faced lightly. But the government of men had to be carried out and order and justice recovered from the anarchy of times like the reign of Stephen. Immediately upon his accession, therefore, Henry II set himself to the reconstituting and extending of royal authority and the rule of law. There was a tightening up all round. Sheriffs and coroners were entrusted with additional duties. Local courts and local juries found themselves with increased responsibilities. By the development of the system of sending out royal justices on judicial and administrative business Henry made the King's justice a reality throughout the land.

The Church courts and the privileges of the clergy, however, remained an exception to the growing rule of law as emanating from the King. That the Church courts had jurisdiction in 'causes touching the rule of souls' was accepted practice. Naturally weakness of the secular authority gave occasion for extending the interpretation of a phrase that of itself was far from precise (e.g. a breach of contract could be considered a breach of faith and morals). The development of canon law had quickened concern for its application and the Church's legal pretensions could hardly fail to

find support from Rome. So the issue was bound to come to a crisis sooner or later. In England the centre of the conflict was the claim of the Church courts to judge and punish their own order. Such penalties as the clerical courts could impose did not extend to the shedding of blood; imprisonment was administratively hardly possible; penance and, more severely, degradation were the usual penalties. It is easy to see how open to abuse was such a 'law within the law'. When many clerks or lower clergy were men with little education and moral standards no higher than laymen of their type, scandals were frequent. One chronicler, writing within ten years of the accession of Henry II, said that since that date more than a hundred murders had been committed by clerics.

To Henry such extensive exemption from royal jurisdiction was an intolerable anomaly, not least because it meant a considerable loss of revenues. He looked to Becket as Archbishop to help him in regularising the admitted legal rights of the Church. No sooner established as Archbishop, however, than Becket showed himself zealous for all the rights of the Church and often opposed the King even on matters that were in no way ecclesiastical. High-handed as was his nature, Becket dealt haughtily with clerical cases after his own interpretation of canon law and the gloss of Jerome on the prophet Nahum: '*Nec enim Deus indicat bis in idipsum.*' ('For God judges not twice for the same offence.')

At the Council of Westminster (October 1163) Henry at once made his position clear: 'Therefore, my Lord of Canterbury, I demand your consent and that of your brethren, that clerics who are taken in crimes

be straightway degraded, and given over to my officers to receive corporal punishment, without any defence from the Church.' Becket persuaded the bishops to refuse their consent. When Henry went on to require a pledge that the clergy would observe in all things his royal customs, Becket and the rest agreed—but with the meaningful addition of 'saving our order'. Later, in December of the same year, having failed to obtain positive support from the Pope and his fellow bishops for the conflict ahead, Becket verbally yielded: 'With a lively hope in your prudence and moderation. I assent to what is required of me, and in good faith promise to observe the customs.'

At this point we have a clear instance of the effect of character on the immediate course of events. Another king would have rested the matter on this concession: Henry determined to codify these imprecise royal customs which Becket had just given his word to observe. In January 1164 a council was summoned to Clarendon, there to secure Becket's acceptance of the formally stated Constitutions of Clarendon, sixteen in all. Clause 3 was a moderate version of earlier royal demands: it required that after conviction in the bishop's court a cleric should no longer enjoy protection by the Church. But on this and on the clauses requiring the King's leave to be obtained for an appeal to Rome from the King's court, for absence from the country, and before a tenant in chief could be excommunicated, Becket firmly said 'No'. Then to the bewilderment of his followers and the astonishment of all Becket again gave verbal assent—for which he was immediately to reproach himself in bitterness and penance—but refused to sign or seal the document.

Here indeed, in the nicely balanced validity of royal and ecclesiastical claims, in the behaviour of both Henry and Becket, is material rich in dramatic possibility. Why, then, has Eliot so handled it that the common reader of *Murder In The Cathedral* has difficulty in saying what all the talk of 'the old disputes' is about or what opinion he can form of the respective rights and wrongs of the two opponents. There is good reason for this rigid subordination of the widening breach between the one-time friends and its political repercussions which troubled the whole of Henry's Angevin empire. Eliot has, of course, a purpose quite other than would have engaged Bernard Shaw, had he written 'The Archbishop Murder Case' (Eliot's original title for his play!). In a later section we shall see what this is. Here we shall do well to keep in mind how much indeed of the historical material is touched on or hinted at throughout the play.

Let us now complete this survey of the course of events. At the Council of Northampton, October 1164, the King openly proceeded against Becket on various charges ranging from contempt of the King's court to malversation of public and ecclesiastical moneys. Though sentence was never formally passed on him, Becket was a condemned man. A month later he secretly left England and eventually found refuge in the Cistercian Abbey of Pontigny.

Becket received only fluctuating support from the Pope, Alexander III, and the French King, Louis VII. From Vezelay, whither he went after two years at Pontigny, he excommunicated bishops and laymen alike and even Henry was not exempt from his threats.

A reconciliation might have been effected at Montmirail, January 1169, and again at Montmartre later that year: at the former Becket would not forgo the formulas 'salvo honore Dei' and 'salvo ordine suo'; at the latter Henry could not bring himself to give the kiss of peace.

'We need not dwell on the details of the long struggle.'¹ Becket, not surprisingly, was incensed by the coronation (June 1170) of the young Prince Henry by the Archbishop of York (Canterbury has always insisted on precedence over York in this matter). Suddenly at La Ferté Bernard there was another meeting and a reconciliation between Henry and Becket. This was 'A patched up affair', but probably both antagonists welcomed a truce. Becket certainly wanted to return to England, although it seems well attested that he was conscious that his projected return would be marked by his death. In his parting words to the Bishop of Paris he said: 'I am going to England to die.' He expressed the same thought in his last conversation with Henry:

'Go in peace. I will see you at Rouen or in England as soon as I can.'

'My lord, my heart tells me that you will never see me again.'

'Do you think I am a traitor?'

'No, my lord.'

On December 1st he landed at Sandwich. At once the feud showed itself and Thomas's last words to the Priests upon their meeting succinctly tell of the danger he ran. Headstrong as ever, Becket on Christmas

¹ *op. cit.*, p. 211.

Day used his pulpit to denounce and excommunicate his enemies. In Normandy Henry received the suspended bishops of York, London and Salisbury. From their report Henry was stung to the exclamation (of which we have several slightly differing versions): 'What slothful wretches I have brought up in my kingdom, who have no more loyalty to their King than to suffer him to be so disgracefully mocked by this low-born cleric!'

The King's messenger failed to overtake the four knights, Reginald Fitz Urse, William de Tracy, Hugh de Morville and Richard le Breton (or Brito) before they had broken into the cathedral and murdered the Archbishop.

Excitement at the murder was instant and widespread. The monks who hastily sought to bury the body discovered haircloth next the skin; this confirmed belief that Thomas was indeed a martyr. Within three days miracles were accomplished in his name: the wife of a knight in Sussex, suffering from an infirmity accompanied with blindness, received her sight. From the first days of 1171 reports of miraculous cures began to reach Canterbury—of the child Huelina in Gloucester cured of chronic head pains, of the venerable knight, William Belet, relieved of a swollen arm, of one recovering sight, of another freed from paralysis. The story of wondrous cures continued to grow, receiving Papal approbation and leading to the canonization of Thomas on the 21st of February 1173.

And what of the four knights? What in truth was their subsequent history is difficult to discern through the enveloping cloud of monastic prejudice. It was

popularly believed that they were sent to the Holy Land where Morville, Fitz Urze and Brito died after three years fighting. Traci—so the chroniclers have it—never reached the Holy Land. One version says that on reaching Calabria he was seized with a disease that caused him to rend the flesh from his bones. Less colourful record has it that within two years the knights were again received at court and established themselves as holders of estates and even of high judicial office.

Of Henry himself the story is more soberly substantiated. Immediately on receiving the news he withdrew into solitude, repenting in sackcloth and ashes. The utmost wrath of the Papacy—excommunication and interdict—was not visited upon him. After busying himself with affairs in Ireland Henry returned to Normandy and received absolution on the 22nd May 1172, on terms that were by no means severe.

In fulfilment of the penance imposed on him Henry, in 1174, went on foot in penitential garb through the streets of Canterbury. At the tomb of St. Thomas in the crypt, wearing sackcloth and a rough woollen shirt, he received over two hundred strokes to mark his submission. Henry gained much of what he had contended for, but yielded to the Church on their right of appeal to Rome, and criminous clerks continued to enjoy 'benefit of clergy' (at least for more serious offences) until the long struggle between the king's justices and the ecclesiastical courts was resolved in the 16th century.

Further reading: T. F. Stout: *Thomas à Becket in History*. A. L. Poole: *From Domesday Book To Magna Carta*.

Questions:

1. What features of the story of Becket and Henry II seem to you most directly translatable into dramatic form?

2. Why do you think Eliot shows so little interest in the matters at issue between Becket and the King?

3. Does some knowledge of the historical background in any way affect your response to and opinion of *Murder In The Cathedral*?

4. What are the main points of interest suggested by a comparison of *Murder In The Cathedral* with Shaw's *St. Joan* (or with any recent play dealing with Becket and Henry II, e.g. Anouilh's *Becket*, Christopher Fry's *Curtmantle*).

III. THE TRIPLE THEME

1. *The Personal Element*

When a playwright turns to the past for the subject of his drama, it is rarely that he is primarily concerned to present in 'the two hours' traffic of the stage' a representation of historical events or of accepted myth. He does not see himself as a historian seeking to show in the theatre a picture of what actually happened with such accuracy as research or tradition may furnish. Rather is he the interpreter for his own age and according to his own vision of what, in the main, his audience is already familiar with. Even Shakespeare was probably more anxious to present in the English historical plays his conception of kingship than the vicissitudes of the Wars of The Roses or the fortunes of the House of Lancaster; and when he based a tragedy like *Macbeth* or *Coriolanus* on material provided by Holinshed or Plutarch, it was not the historical data but the moral and political principles and, above all, the complex interplay of personal motives, of the interaction of character and event, that engaged his creative interest. For the dramatist, if not for the historian, the past is but the springboard for the imagination and for the release of those personal interests which have developed to such a degree of intensity that he is driven to use his medium, the theatre, for their organized release.

What I wish to say at this point may be made clearer by reference to Milton's *Lycidas*. When Edward King was drowned in 1637, the poet was asked to contribute to a volume of memorial verse. The

resultant poem may well have surprised King's friends. For *Lycidas* had but little to say of the college friend Edward King, but a deal to say of the poet John Milton. It afforded Milton the occasion to do two things that had only the most tenuous connection with Edward King: to resolve his fears of an early death before his fame was established; and to release what had long been disturbing his mind—the state of the Church under Archbishop Laud's direction. It was as if the untimely death of King, coupled with the invitation to write a commemorative poem, acted as a reagent to precipitate something deeply personal in Milton himself. The more we look at his writings and his studies previous to *Lycidas*, the more we can see the poem as having a markedly personal relevance, even though its occasion and publication were of a public nature.

To understand, therefore, what Eliot is seeking to do in *Murder In The Cathedral*, we must bear in mind on what path his feet were set and see from his precedent writings whither he was tending. We must remember how, ever since *The Waste Land* (1922), Eliot has been acutely aware of two things: the spiritual apathy of the contemporary world and of his own pilgrimage towards spiritual certainty. Many of you will already know something of his unsparing examination of the moral aridity with its concomitant debasement of sex that marks his picture of the world around him in the early Twenties. Making use of the anthropologist's findings about ritual magic and fertility cults as a source for the predominant imagery of *The Waste Land*, Eliot castigates contemporary society for its psiritual deadness, its perversion of the life-giving

flow of desire and for its unawareness of that which he himself so feels the need of—refreshment of the soul. Perhaps the lowest point of this sense of man's spiritual poverty and of his own failure to find meaning in life is expressed in *The Hollow Men* (1925).

It is always dangerous to read poetry as autobiography. Especially is this so with a poet such as Eliot who has always been interested in the technique of poetry and whose lines are often echoes of or stylistic devices modelled on thoughts and phrases from other poets. But at least a poem is indicative of a state of mind or mood, and *The Hollow Men*, with its two epigraphs ('Mistah Kurtz—he dead' from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and 'A penny for the Old Guy') as pointers, certainly suggests Eliot's negative attitude to life at this time. There is throughout the five sections of the poem a sense of debasement and disillusionment from which only apathy affords relief.

From that surrender to the hollowness of life the subsequent writings of Eliot show a gradual emergence and advance towards religious conviction. With the *Journey of the Magi* (1927) and *For Launcelot Andrewes* (1928)¹ we see Eliot moving forward from a time of, at best, merely 'waiting for rain' (i.e. for the quickening of the spirit in an apprehension of God) to a positive searching. In *Journey of the Magi* the narrator (a projection of Eliot himself) has had an experience that is described as 'satisfactory'. He has come to accept the Birth of Christ but is still not ready for a full acceptance of all that this will demand. 'No

¹ Faber & Gwyer, London 1928. Eight 'Essays on Style and Order', with a short preface containing this sentence: 'The point of view may be described as classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo catholic in religion.'

longer at ease' in a world from which he is seeking liberation, Eliot has not yet entered emotionally and with his whole being what his *For Launcelot Andrewes* shows to be his intellectual assent to Christianity.

Close to *Journey of the Magi* both in time and the stage reached in Eliot's pilgrimage is *A Song for Simeon* (1928). Both poems are marked by a consciousness of inadequacy. In both the poet feels himself some way from that severest testing of the soul which may be the necessary preliminary to the full acceptance of God's will.

In 1930 came the series of poems grouped under the title *Ash-Wednesday*. The whole is an intricate composition, a network of associations and cross-references. There is an ambivalent research of time past, a reaching back in memory for things loved that can no longer be, and yet a rejoicing that from the searching for an irrecoverable past there is set up a tension with the need of the moment—to set his spiritual house in order. However difficult to understand, the poem does not fail to communicate. From it we know that Eliot is passing towards a new phase of life. It is a difficult poem to quote from, but the end of the poem shows a turning of himself towards the will of God and a further development in his poetic idiom. Simple in diction, holding attention by cadences and repetition, it clearly reveals a liturgical influence. These closing lines are a natural preface to *Murder In The Cathedral*:

' This is the time of tension between dying and birth
The place of solitude where three dreams cross
Between blue rocks

But when the voices shaken from the yew-tree drift
away

Let the other yew be shaken and reply.

Blessèd sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain,
spirit of the garden,

Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood

Teach us to care and not to care

Teach us to sit still

Even among these rocks,

Our peace in His will

And even among these rocks

Sister, mother

And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,

Suffer me not to be separated

And let my cry come unto Thee.'

If you think over the first line of this extract and the many connotations carried by 'dying' and 'birth', you will have some idea of how far was Eliot in 1930 from both the disillusionment of *The Waste Land* (1922) and the rejoicing of the Te Deum in *Murder In The Cathedral* (1935).

In 1934 Eliot collaborated in the writing of a pageant, *The Rock*, organized on behalf of a building fund for a group of London churches. This is not an important work, but it afforded Eliot scope for experiment in the writing of verse in measures varied according to the different speakers in the pageant. More particularly it required of him a number of choric passages. As the Chorus, after the Greek prototype, is a commentator on the pageant, it uses a wide range of tone. Considerable mastery of verse is called for to convey dispassionate commentary on the

human scene of fruitless labour and soulless escape from labour, urgent reproach and exhortation, the simplicity of dedication and the swelling rhythms of praise and thanksgiving. 'I learnt,' says Eliot of *The Rock*, 'only that verse to be spoken by a choir should be different from verse to be spoken by one person: and that the more voices you have in your choir, the simpler and more direct the vocabulary, the syntax, and the content of your lines must be.' *The Rock* served as journey-man work before the more surely wrought *Murder In The Cathedral*.

So we can now see that the invitation to write a play for the Canterbury Festival found Eliot ready, spiritually and poetically, for such a stimulus to creation. He himself says (*The Three Voices of Poetry* (1953)) of the writing of a play: 'It is likely, of course, that it is in the beginning the pressure of some rude unknown *psychic material* that directs the poet to tell that particular story, to develop that particular situation.' Our brief survey has shown us that we can be reasonably certain of what, in this case that 'psychic material' was. It was an inner compulsion to find expression for and thus convince himself of the one thing needful to his own spiritual peace—complete surrender to the will of God, what he had long known from Dante's line '*E la sua volontate è nostra pace*' (In His will is our peace). This determines his treatment of Thomas. He virtually ignores Becket's career, he compresses the quarrel with King Henry into incidental reference, he focuses on the temptation and the triumph over that temptation. How deliberate this is and how deeply engaged is Eliot himself in the resolution of Thomas's ordeal is seen in the sermon on

Christmas morning. Against the evidence of his historical sources which show Becket referring to his nearness to death (*praedicens post alia in calce sermonis quod instaret tempus dissolutionis suae, et in brevi se migraturum ab iis*)¹ and then going on furiously to inveigh against his enemies (*tam ferus, tam indignabundus, tam ardens, tam audens, nominatim jam et expressim in cervicosos et spurcos invehitur*),² Eliot gives us the calm exposition of the true nature of martyrdom. Whatever else our study of *Murder In The Cathedral* may show, let us not forget that it is a personal profession of faith made by a man who has come 'a journey, and such a long journey'.

Further reading: Study the poems referred to in this section (*Collected Poems 1909-1935*).

Questions:

1. How far do you think a dramatist is entitled to impose his own interpretation on the historical material he uses for a play?

2. 'Eliot makes Thomas after his own image.' How would you interpret this dictum and to what extent do you think the statement can be justified?

2. The Nature of Martyrdom

Let us see how Eliot presents and develops that which is central to his presentation of Thomas à Becket as it is to the play as a whole—the nature of Christian martyrdom. From the first Chorus and the ensuing conversation of the three Priests and the Messenger we learn that the return of Archbishop

¹ After other matters foretelling, later in his sermon, that the time of his death was drawing nigh and that he would shortly be leaving them.

² So wildly, indignantly, earnestly and boldly did he attack openly and even by name the arrogant and the corrupt.

Thomas is not in itself an assurance of reconciliation between himself and King Henry II.

‘What peace can be found

To grow between the hammer and the anvil?’

Thomas himself tells us that there will be ‘little rest in Canterbury’ and that it is only for the moment that he is left unmolested and

‘End will be simple, sudden, God-given.’

So far Eliot has done no more than any dramatist would find necessary in the exposition of a drama that was to culminate in the murder of Thomas à Becket. Yet already, if he has not given a direct pointer to martyrdom, he has created an atmosphere appropriate for such an event and for the realization of what martyrdom may mean to the world. Of the Tempters who now enter the scene we need here concern ourselves only with the Fourth. He, the voice within Thomas himself, calls on Thomas to ‘Fare forward to the end’. In three successive speeches he lays before Thomas the ‘glory after death’ whereby as saint and martyr the Archbishop, in contrast with the transient authority of a king, will ‘rule from the tomb’. Even if, he says, foreshadowing the sixteenth century, the time may come when the shrine will be pillaged and worship no longer made there, Thomas will enter into the glorious company of Saints ‘Dwelling forever in presence of God’. This, then, is the greatest temptation and the greatest treason, for it is, as Thomas in the moment of truth realizes,

‘To do the right deed for the wrong reason.’

What then is the right reason for standing firm on

the line he has taken on behalf of the Church against the King? What is the right way in which Thomas should address himself to what may await him? For answer we must look both before and after the encounter with the Fourth Tempter.

First we must go back to Thomas's words (significantly his first in the play and, equally important, repeated as the last of the Fourth Tempter):

'They know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer.

They know and do not know, that action is suffering
And suffering is action.' Neither does the agent suffer

Nor the patient act. But both are fixed

In an eternal action, an eternal patience

To which all must consent that it may be willed

And which all must suffer that they may will it,

That the pattern may subsist, for the pattern is the action

And the suffering, that the wheel may turn and still
Be forever still.'

This is perhaps the most difficult passage to comprehend in the whole play. You will find the meaning easier to arrive at if you put away from your interpretation the association of 'pain' from the words 'suffer' and 'patient' and, instead, keep in mind the Latin origins of the two groups of words (act, agent, action; suffer, patient, patience/suffering) on which this deliberately patterned speech is constructed. The apparent antithesis of these terms depends on the meaning of the Latin 'agere' and 'pati': 'to do' (one's own will) and 'to bear' (the will of another).

Thus what Thomas (and after him comes the echo from the Fourth Tempter) is expressing is the mystery of the working of the individual will of man within and at one with the will or the purpose of God. God, in the tradition of Catholic interpretation, leaves man free to will his life, yet that freedom is the freedom to do His will and to act in oneness with His purpose.

So we are led directly to the second utterance of Thomas which explicitly states the true nature of martyrdom. This is in the last paragraph but one of his Christmas morning sermon. Having introduced a reference to the martyrdom of Stephen on the day following the birth of Christ, Thomas goes on to state quite simply: 'A Christian martyrdom is never an accident, for Saints are not made by accident.' Not by the will of man but only within the design of God is Christian martyrdom accomplished: 'It is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, and who no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of being a martyr.' (Thus identification with the will of God resolves the antithesis of 'acting' and 'suffering'). Thomas has in this way dealt with his most insidious temptation. Henceforth his will is attuned to the will of God. The opening words of his speech closing Part I:

'Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain'
have received their formal interpretation and ratification. We are now able also to understand aright the line, enigmatic at first,

'I shall no longer act or suffer, to the sword's end.'

It remains to point out what the martyrdom of Thomas means to the Chorus of the Women of Canterbury and thus to that timeless audience of which we ourselves are a part. To mark the awful moment, the more appalling because the murder of the Archbishop takes place within his Cathedral, Eliot gives to the Chorus a lament which is charged with a sense of utter and universal pollution. In the insistent rhythms that assert the need for the cleansing of life, of the day and common things now all smeared with blood, we are to realize the first, natural revulsion of man at the evil that issues in the killing of Thomas, Archbishop of Canterbury. But—and here we catch something of what poetic as distinct from naturalistic idiom can achieve—we are made to feel also that the event of December 29, 1170, is but an instance of that which extends beyond historical time, that it is

‘An instant eternity of evil and wrong.’

It is not, however, on this cry of despair at the evil that envelops not merely the twelfth but the twentieth century that Eliot closes the theme of martyrdom. Taking up the affirmation of the Third Priest that the Church is not weakened but strengthened by what has happened, the Chorus give forth (against a *Te Deum* sung distantly in Latin) their own song of praise and thanksgiving. However limited their own spiritual experience, they know that their earth is enriched by the blood of the martyrs, that the sanctity of ground made holy by the life and death of a saint is not subject to time, and that

‘From such ground springs that which forever renews the earth

Though it is forever denied. Therefore, O God, we
thank Thee
Who hast given such blessing to Canterbury.'

Questions:

1. In the light of the play would you say that death for one's political or intellectual convictions is rightly to be called martyrdom?

2. 'The blood of the martyrs is not shed in vain.' What support does the play afford for such a statement?

3. Can there ever be justification for doing the right deed for the wrong reason?

4. In what ways does the story of Becket as presented in *Murder In The Cathedral* remind us of certain features in the story of Christ?

5. 'Martyrdom is seen as something recurrently necessary—a sacrifice that begins in pollution and ends in cleansing.' Interpret and discuss this comment on the play.

3. The Spiritual Malaise

Much of the writing of Eliot has been in examination of contemporary society, particularly its cultural, moral and religious characteristics. His criticism has always derived from a moral, and, increasingly, from a religious standpoint. As his own social judgment and religious beliefs have clarified from a sincere but inchoate dissatisfaction with the general spiritual slackness of the times, as they have been ever more clearly defined by acceptance of the Christian faith, he has been outspoken in asserting that we must, both as individuals and as a society, take Christianity a great

deal more seriously than we do. Much of what he means by his concern that men should live more nearly by Christian doctrine in their personal and social life is to be found in his book *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939). Although this was written subsequently to *Murder In The Cathedral*, it is arguable that it was but the formulation of ideas long considered and that the play is, in part, an expression of his ideas on the spiritual state of society in the middle Thirties.

As has been indicated earlier, Eliot is a man of letters who has always been conscious that poetry, in Arnold's phrase, is 'a criticism of life'. No doubt, both in its original context (*Essays in Criticism 2nd Series* 1888) and in subsequent usage, this oft-repeated dictum has been variously interpreted and expanded to apply to literature generally. Certainly in so far as as it is saying that the creative writer cannot be indifferent to his age and that his work, in choice of subject matter, in attitude and emphasis, in the values it upholds, will reflect upon society, its relevance to *Murder In The Cathedral* is obvious. The death of Thomas à Becket, treated not as an historical event but as a spiritual examination of the nature of martyrdom, is set against a background not only of the twelfth but also of the twentieth century. We may indeed go further and say that this play, by the very fact that it is dealing with matters of the spirit and of the experience of God's will, is essentially 'out of time'. We watch as on the screen of time what is projected from eternity. In any century—twelfth or twentieth—there are those whose mode of life and whose measure of faith fall short of that which Christianity demands—the constant endeavour to identify

our will with the will of God. Not least in interest, therefore, in *Murder In The Cathedral* is Eliot's weaving into the martyrdom of Thomas and so into the pattern which is 'action' and 'suffering' the involvement of the Chorus, of those who acknowledge themselves 'as type of the common man'.

The first thing that marks the Women of Canterbury—and henceforward I shall assume that they essentially represent the common man of any century—is their awareness that they are being drawn into events which both disturb and transcend their experience. They have their manifold burdens and they ask no more than to be allowed to cope with these as best they may. Yet they sense that now a disaster greater than the various tribulations they accept of life is coming upon them. (Remembering what has been said of the world in the mid-Thirties, can you see how the first audiences of the play would hear and interpret overtones of contemporary reference in the fears of the Women of Canterbury?) They know the ups and downs of everyday life and, because these are familiar, they have come not simply to accept them, but to find a certain security within them. Read again the second speech of the Chorus and see how in the section beginning

'We do not wish anything to happen.'

the easy, simple, repetitive phrasing and slack rhythm communicate the sense that the misfortunes of daily life are rehearsed gently, one may even say tenderly. (Don't we sometimes speak of 'hugging' our misfortunes?) Most of us 'do not wish anything to happen'; as Eliot later in the play expresses it:

‘ Human kind cannot bear very much reality.’

The Women of Canterbury are aware that they are not able to bear, that they do not wish to bear a new and greater ordeal than the familiar disappointments and set-backs of their simple lives. When some crisis—such as they fear in the return of their Archbishop—draws them out of ‘the daily round and common task’, they feel bewildered, afraid in ‘a fear which none can understand. All they ask, as always men in general will ask, is to go on ‘living and partly living’. But it is of the very essence of Eliot’s purpose to show that no one can contract out of moral responsibility. The close of Thomas’s last speech in Part I drives home this point—for the twentieth as for the twelfth century—that

‘ for every evil, every sacrilege,
Crime, wrong, oppression and the axe’s edge,
Indifference, exploitation, you, and you,
And you, must all be punished. So must you.’

Though in itself their spiritual experience may not be profound, most men are capable of recognizing when they are in the presence of a spiritual challenge or of a situation charged with significance for their whole life. Thus the Women of Canterbury are filled with the consciousness that the coming of the Knights has threatened all life with pollution. They feel that they too are involved in the imminent horror and that their greatest need is for an utter purging of themselves and of the world.

The first of the three great choric passages (‘stasima’) which dominate this part of the play is charged

with imagery derived from nature and so intense and unrelieved is it that it communicates a vision of utter evil, all-pervasive and death-bringing. Revolting, nauseating as the imagery is, it is still subordinate to the awful truth, agonizingly confessed by the Women, that they themselves are a part of this putrid whole.

The next passage is in a quieter manner and seems to show an exhaustion of spirit—

‘ Emptiness, absence, separation from God— ’
that can find relief only in simple intercession—

‘ Help me, Lord, in my last fear

.....
Help me, Lord, for death is near.’

The third of the choric passages that punctuate the perpetration of the murder of the Archbishop opens and closes in a cry for purgation. Ritual ablution is as old as religion itself and it is appropriate that imagery derived from defilement and cleansing should mark this stasimon, uttered as an accompaniment to the killing of Thomas. From this last Chorus, as from the two preceding ones, what is impressed on us is that, however much we would prefer to escape involvement in the ‘ eternity of evil and wrong ’ we cannot.

Questions:

1. What were the major political issues, at home and abroad, in the mid-Thirties?
2. Do you agree that ‘ Human kind cannot bear very much reality ’?
3. Is the common man fairly represented by the Women of Canterbury?

4. What is your idea of a Christian society?

5. How does Eliot use 'shock tactics' (e.g. strikingly contemporary idiom and reference) to show the timelessness of the theme of martyrdom and its bearing on the spiritual life of the community?

IV. THE FOUR TEMPTERS

Once Eliot has established the initial situation—the return of Thomas from an exile of seven years but without any settlement of his difference with King Henry II—and through the two speeches of the Chorus has made us feel an atmosphere of tension and apprehensiveness, he springs a dramatic surprise. When we look back over the text, we can see that Thomas's lines—

‘ Meanwhile the substance of our first act
Will be shadows, and the strife with shadows.
Heavier the interval than the consummation.
All things prepare the event. Watch.’

prepare for his conflict with forces which are real, though they are not of flesh and blood. (It is in this sense that we can interpret ‘shadows’.) But in the theatre we are not able at once to comprehend his words and we receive a shock and an immediate quickening of interest when a figure, probably dressed in all the colourful splendour of a twelfth century courtier, breaks into brisk and unexpectedly rhymed lines. Who is this figure? He may owe something in his appearance to Harlequin or to the Lord of Misrule, but from his first words we see that he really represents a voice from the days, now past, when the Archbishop who has challenged the might of Angevin sovereignty was ‘Old Tom, gay Tom, Becket of London’. He reminds Thomas of the delights of companionship with the King, of revelry throughout the year, of all the excitements of the senses—all that ‘wit and wine

and wisdom' can offer to a man burdened with melancholy and the gravity of the unresolved conflict between himself and his king.

Thomas has no difficulty in dealing with this temptation to resume friendship with the King on terms of surrender to the pleasures of this world. And, in view of the subsequent Temptations, it is to be noted that both the appeal and the dismissal of the First Tempter engage Thomas at no depth of personality or of spirit. There is nothing specifically religious in Thomas's summary rejection of such a bait. Any man of sense knows that maturity teaches the impossibility of returning to a way of life that sufficed for earlier years.

The second Temptation is an altogether more serious one. Essentially what is put before Thomas is not wholly unworthy of him—or of any man whose conception of life is bounded by the here and now, who does not know 'the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life'. If life is unrelated to a belief in a reality and in values that transcend the material, above all if it is unrelated to the Christian belief in God and His requirements of man, then the achievement of the greatest measure of justice in this world is no mean object for a man to aim at. It is just this, via the resumption of the Chancellorship and alliance with the King, that the Second Tempter holds towards Thomas. His line of approach is forthright. Briefly he refers to the occasions when Thomas and Henry have clashed and passes lightly over them as 'not too pleasant memories'. He moves directly to his offer—power. Many seek power and not necessarily from unworthy motives. Used for the good of all—and

that is the central idea of the Temptation—it cannot, if measured merely by earthly standards, be held as a reprehensible aim. For a moment it would seem (look at the terse exchange of question and answer between Thomas and the Tempter) that the Archbishop's attention is arrested. But it is only for a moment. It may be that the very phrasing of the answer to his last question respecting the prize to be gained—

‘ For the power and the glory ’

halts Thomas's readiness to question further. He knows another context for that phrase. From his repeated ‘ No! ’ the Tempter is powerless to move him. He returns to the argument that, in exercising again authority at the right hand of the King, Thomas will be serving both King and churl, his former friend and the people. He will be furthering the establishment of the rule of law for the benefit of all. But to this Thomas has an irrefragable answer: under the Pope he has a greater, because a spiritual office:

‘ Delegate to deal the doom of damnation,
To condemn kings, not serve among their servants,
Is my open office.’

One thing is common to the first two Tempters: they derive from the past. The Third and Fourth Tempters speak of what lies in the future. With his first words this ‘ unexpected visitor ’, the Third Tempter, ‘ a rough straightforward Englishman ’, brings into the dialogue an accent that contrasts equally with the First Tempter's nimble-footed pertness and with the aphoristic yet decorous forthrightness of the Second Tempter. There is indeed a certain

incongruity—in the theatre very effective—in that so subtle a political argument is to be presented by one who professes to be no politician and who wishes to be taken as a country lord speaking for those who know what the country needs. (At one moment the Third Tempter's moral and political generalizations surprise Thomas into the shrewd comment:

‘ For a countryman
You wrap your meaning in as dark generality
As any courtier.’)

For the Third Tempter is the dramatic expedient whereby Eliot can break through the confines of historical time. He represents the stream or tendency of historical evolution. The story of English constitutional development is of the devolution of power to the very class, the landed class, whom the Third Tempter represents. From the struggle over Magna Carta (less than a generation from the time of the play) through to the achievement of parliamentary democracy it has been the country lords—at first feudal magnates, later the squirearchy (men like Pym, Hampden, Cromwell)—who have gained political dominance progressively at the expense of the Crown. What therefore is now offered to Thomas is to align himself with the forces of the future. Historically, and more nearly related to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, is the fact that it was indeed the coalition of the interests of the Church and the feudal nobility which was able to wring concessions from the monarchy. Thomas is aware that if the Third Tempter's party can secure alliance with the Church there may well result a weakening of the central authority and a breakdown

of that remarkable legal system which he has helped Henry to establish. It is this knowledge that the rule of law would be threatened, joined with disgust at the stooping to political manoeuvring, that enables Thomas loftily to dismiss the Third Tempter:

‘ Shall I who ruled like an eagle over doves
Now take the shape of a wolf among wolves?
Pursue your treacheries as you have done before:
No one shall say that I betrayed a king.’

There is a pause while Thomas reflects upon his latest visitor and affirms his determination to act only as his deepest, personal purpose—to stand even unto death for his principles—directs him. Suddenly his words are endorsed by the quiet voice of the Fourth Tempter. It is soon clear who is this fourth visitor—the one who always precedes expectation, perhaps because he is ever within. He is the lesser self of Thomas, the self who is capable of envisaging martyrdom, but a martyrdom sought for the wrong reason—self-glorification either as ‘ Saint and Martyr (ruling) from the tomb ’ or as one received into the ‘ glory of Saints

Dwelling forever in presence of God.’

As with the Third Tempter, Eliot again moves beyond the moment of the twelfth century. First he anticipates the honour that will come to Thomas and to Canterbury as the most famous shrine in England. The memory of the murdered Archbishop will haunt succeeding kings in their dealings with the Church. The pilgrims will bring their devotion and their gifts. Then he looks further into the course of history, beyond this authority and this splendour. He sees the

spoliation of the Church in the sixteenth century when

‘ the shrine shall be pillaged, and the gold spent,
The jewels gone for light ladies’ ornament.
The sanctuary broken, and its stores
Swept into the laps of parasites and whores.’

Even further his vision extends: to the time of scientific historical research, when Thomas will be no more than another figure in the text-books, a ‘ man who played a certain part in history ’. Such a prospect may well prompt Thomas’s question, marked by despair if not by agony, whether for all one does there ‘ is no enduring crown to be won ’. And for this cry (here Eliot probes deepest in his conception of Thomas) the Fourth Tempter has his answer: reward in heaven. It is the moment of greatest temptation, for this is a sin beyond the veniality of yielding to the senses, beyond the vanity of resuming temporal authority, beyond the attractiveness of moving with the course of history. It is the sin of spiritual pride. Thomas prevails, but his triumph entails his destruction. The parting words of the Fourth Tempter then echo Thomas’s earlier pondering on the mystery of the working of the will of God through the will of man. Chorus, Tempters, Priests, each in distinctive idiom, comment on the crisis now reached, their thoughts next mingling in a passage like a trio in oratorio. And after a choric plaint that expresses the shift from the familiar trials of this world to the awful spiritual burden now confronting mankind, Thomas reviews the temptations he has endured and closes Part I in clearness of purpose and the certainty that God has him in His care.

Questions:

1. How far is it true to say that the Four Tempters are theatrically but not dramatically effective?

2. By what means, apart from the nature of their respective offers, does Eliot differentiate the Four Tempters?

3. What light is thrown on Eliot's conception of Thomas by the Four Temptations?

V. THE KNIGHTS

First Knight: Reginald Fitz Urse.

Second Knight: Sir Hugh de Morville.

Third Knight: Baron William de Traci.

Fourth Knight: Richard Brito.

The part of the Knights in *Murder In The Cathedral* can easily be seen to fall into two phases conceived on two totally different planes. In the first they are nearest to being *dramatis personae* in an historical play wherein they are to fulfil their role of interpreting literally the reputed words of Henry II: 'Will none of those who eat my bread and drink my wine rid me of this troublesome priest?' In the second phase, which can conveniently be referred to as their Apologia, they speak wholly out of their historical context and serve in yet another way to liberate the play from the limitations of an historical-chronicle play. Let us now examine these two totally different modes of contributing to the play and its significance.

The first does not call for much comment. It should be noticed that the evil which they represent is symbolically shown in the theatre by the immediate withdrawal of the banners of St. Stephen, St. John and the Holy Innocents which have just been processionally introduced. There is no place in the Archbishop's Hall for the simultaneous presence of the emblems of the Saints and those of the bringers of death into Canterbury.

It is no concern of Eliot to individualize these Knights. The First, Second and Third Knight are

but three mouths for one intent—punishment of the Archbishop who has defied his king. Their exchange of words with Thomas has dramatic vitality for it is the most sustained passage of open conflict in the play; but it does little more than recapitulate the respective arguments of Henry and Thomas. The episode closes with a line nicely weighted with irony:

‘We come for the King’s justice, we come with swords.’

After the lamentations of the Chorus and the Priests’ unavailing clash with Thomas over his refusal to seek safety in the only way known to them—by turning the sanctuary into a fortress—the Knights make a brief appearance, ‘slightly tipsy’, and singing a kind of sacreligious parody of a revivalist hymn (at once reminding us not of the twelfth century but of our own day and generation). A peremptory demand, ignored by Thomas, for his submission to the King’s wishes and authority, and then they kill the Archbishop, while the Chorus utter their anguished chant which expresses their consciousness of all-pervading evil.

This appearance of the Knights, combining a drunken skit of a hymn with the perpetration of a sacreligious murder, may be seen as transitional to their Apologia which constitutes the second part of their total dramatic function.

It must be difficult for anyone whose first acquaintance with *Murder In The Cathedral* is through reading the play to realize the overwhelming impact in the theatre of the First Knight’s conventional, relaxed, opening sentence—‘We beg you to give us your attention for a few moments.’ I was in a provincial

theatre when the play first went on tour. Very few of us in that audience, I am sure, had any knowledge of the play other than that it was about the murder of Thomas à Becket. I well recall the shock with which, the murder done and the cry of the Chorus still haunting us, we saw the Four Knights advance towards us, so that they seemed to leave the plane of the theatre and suddenly become speakers at some rather intimate public meeting. The contrast, the incongruity with all that we had seen and heard up to this point, disconcerted us; as perhaps you also, in reading the play, have wondered what to make of this *coup de théâtre*.

It may be just this very experience of shock that gives at once the clue to Eliot's purpose. We are to be jolted out of any complacent acceptance of the play as an interesting experiment in poetic drama, a new-fangled way of presenting a moment in England's history. We are not to be allowed—even if it were conceivably likely that the Women of Canterbury had failed to make us realize that they spoke for us as for themselves—to sit back and enjoy the play simply as an aesthetic or dramatic experience. 'This concerns *you*' is implicit throughout the play; it is made explicit by the Knights Apologia.

The First Knight has all the manner of the practised chairman. There is the calculated flattery of the audience in the tribute which he pays (and which no English audience can resist) to our sense of fair play and our pride in Trial by Jury. He characteristically depreciates his own abilities as a speaker whilst playing up to our appreciation of the 'man of action and not of words'. Then with a hint that we, if rightly instructed,

will be in a position to assess 'this extremely complex problem', he introduces the first apologist, Baron William de Traci. By the end of this glibly phrased 'chairman's address' we have adjusted ourselves to this apparently irrelevant and incongruous interlude. The oddity and remoteness of references to 'fair play' and 'hearing both sides of the case' when we have just witnessed the martyrdom of the Archbishop touch our sense of the ludicrous. By the close of his remarks we know that it would have been all right had we given way to those smothered guffaws we were startled into by Fitz Urse's opening words.

The Third Knight, who now follows, slips into his speech with all the deprecating modesty of the guest speaker at a Club Dinner. He is single-minded to a degree that becomes irresistibly laughable—'We have been perfectly disinterested'. There is not a sentence in his speech which, delivered by an accomplished interpreter with the right accent, tone and timing, will not get its laugh. Fundamentally our response arises from the utter unreality of his plea, phrased in the colloquial terms that a speaker will often use to make his hearers feel that he is one of them when all the time he rates them pretty low, both intellectually and socially.

You will find it quite an entertaining exercise to determine exactly why the Third Knight's speech should move so directly our sense of humour. We cannot immediately 'place' the whole business. Echoes of debating societies, of after-dinner toasts and responses, of political meetings addressed by V.I.P.'s, even of parodies of such occasions—the stock in trade of the Little or Intimate Revue (isn't

there something undergraduatish about the whole speech?)—all this can certainly be sensed.

But when we come to the Second Knight's speech there is a shift in the whole tone. This change is not merely to afford variety of comedic effect; it corresponds to the far more serious content of Sir Hugh de Morville's contribution.

There is, in contrast to the manner of the previous speakers, a formality and explicitness about the whole of the Second Knight's argument. He is the accomplished apologist, first flattering his audience (note again the reference to 'the English spirit of fair play' and to the intelligence of an audience 'not to be taken in by emotional clap-trap') and then soberly presenting the key questions—'What were the Archbishop's aims? and what are King Henry's aims?'

In his next paragraph he shows how Henry, finding on his accession that the strife of Queen Matilda and Stephen had led to division and disorder, had seen the need for a strong centralized government under which an effective legal system could be organized. Moreover, he had found in Becket, his Chancellor, an able collaborator. Therefore when appointing Becket to the See of Canterbury he had anticipated the achievement of 'a union of spiritual and temporal administration, under the central government'. Thomas, however, proved intransigent in asserting the rights of the Church, in affirming that 'there was a higher order' than that of the secular authority and that these two orders were incompatible. Sir Hugh de Morville says all this with firmness and lucidity, as if it were what all right-thinking persons would accept. With the expertness of the special pleader he ignores what

arguments may have made Thomas differ from Henry and glides over the murder with a form of words which have an all too familiar ring in the contemporary world—‘No one regrets the necessity for violence more than we do.’

In so far as, beneath the sustained comedy of this extraordinary interlude, there is a purposeful intent, it may be hinted at in the last part of the speech of the Second Knight. When he sweepingly surveys the course of history and contends that the Knights have been instrumental in bringing about that ‘just subordination of the pretensions of the Church to the welfare of the State’, a relationship approved by his hearers, the ironic humour but thinly covers a serious comment. You should think whether this closing part of the speech may not indicate Eliot’s dissatisfaction with the Erastianism (i.e. the subordination of Church to State) which he and many Churchmen feel to be a consequence of the Reformation in England and which is embodied in the Established Church. The movement for Disestablishment has been steadily growing and Eliot may be hinting his sympathy with that aim beneath the mock solemnity of the Second Knight’s confident peroration. You should also note that, whether the preceding interpretation is warranted or not, the closing words of the speech form yet another instance of the way in which the event of the twelfth century is seen as something from which our later age cannot wholly dissociate itself.

You will not have found this fairly long speech as immediately amusing as the preceding ones. It will therefore have served as a skilfully conceived foil to the extravagance of the argument that the Fourth

Knight now adduces. His speech is an uproariously funny *reductio ad absurdum*, for it deftly twists the interpretation of the course of events to lead to the conclusion that the Archbishop 'had determined upon a death by martyrdom' and therefore, in their capacity of a Coroner's jury, the audience 'will unhesitatingly render a verdict of Suicide while of Unsound Mind'. The laughter that this formula evokes is, dramatically, the culmination of the whole Apologia. It must not, however, be overlooked that there is in the Fourth Knight's casuistry a strange kind of logic and an unmistakeable reference back to the Fourth Temptation. Think this over.

We shall discuss later, when considering the play merely in terms of dramatic technique, whether this interlude is so sudden and emphatic a contrast to its context that it shatters the unity of the play. At this point in our examination of *Murder In The Cathedral* it is sufficient if we have appreciated the nicely varied tones and manner of the Four Knights, the ironic humour that runs throughout the dextrous parodying of professional politicians (and in the 1930's there were many speeches that seem to have served Eliot as models) and, above all, if we have been made aware that in their intimate addresses the Knights have been confirming the connection of the twentieth century with the twelfth.

Further reading: Shaw: *St. Joan*.

Questions:

1. Looking back on the Four Knights' defence of their action, Eliot writes: 'I may, for aught I know, have been slightly under the influence of *St. Joan*.'

With particular reference to the Epilogue, say in what ways Eliot may have been influenced by *St. Joan*.

2. To what extent do you find any correspondence between the Four Tempters and the Four Knights?

3. Does the Apologia of the Knights defeat the serious intent of the whole play?

4. Eliot speaks of 'the use of platform prose' in the speeches of the Knights: what is 'platform prose'?

5. It has been suggested that the Knights are in their own way repeating the Tempters—only this time tempting not Becket but the audience. Think over this comment and show what is the nature of the temptation to which the audience is thus subjected.

VI. DRAMATIC TECHNIQUE

We are all, I hope, alive to the importance of remembering that what appear to be simple and straightforward questions are often complicated when intelligently examined. The context of a critical question has a bearing upon that question and its possible answers. If, then, we ask 'How successful is *Murder In The Cathedral* as a dramatic experiment'? or 'What are the merits of *Murder In The Cathedral* as a play?' we must preface any attempted answer by stating quite clearly that anything we say presupposes our first recognizing that Eliot was primarily concerned to write something for a very particular purpose—the Canterbury Festival, 1935. With such an immediate and non-theatrical function to fulfil the work is not required to conform to or to be judged by the canons of dramatic criticism that are normally applied to a piece written for the theatre. Moreover, even if we leave out of account the relationship of Eliot's play to a particular moment and place and try to see it 'in itself', it is still obvious that criteria that would be legitimate for a new piece for the West End theatre or for works in the post-Ibsen tradition of craftsmanship combined with naturalism are far from applicable to *Murder In The Cathedral*. The play is religious in nature and in purpose. Such an end makes it necessary to distinguish the kind of experience afforded by the play from that which the theatre normally gives us. In this play we are not engaged by the same means or by the same elements of dramatic craftsmanship as generally practised. Yet it is worth-

while briefly considering these and then seeing how far Eliot has made some use of them.

A playwright has to present his initial situation in a way that is more than programme-talk. He must let the audience know the necessary facts and personal relationships and, whether by titillating a sense of comedy or creating a feeling of potential crisis he must set the plot in motion. (This is certainly true of drama in the past; modern or experimental dramatists often find other ways of opening their plays.) The action arising from the initial situation is then developed to a climax or turning point. According to the relative simplicity or complexity of the action this crisis may also be single and felt to be realized within a brief space of time (cf. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* or *Coriolanus*) or complex and sustained for a notable part of the play (cf. *King Lear* or *Antony and Cleopatra*). Then there follow the working out of the crisis which has grown out of the original situation and the resolving of the strained or tangled situation consistently with the characters and with probability. So much may be considered the minimal requirements of a well-constructed play.

It is not difficult to see that from this angle of consideration *Murder In The Cathedral* has little claim to be a play of intricate construction. Two lines by the Chorus (repeated by the First Priest)—

‘Seven years and the summer is over.

Seven years since the Archbishop left us.’

fix the moment for Thomas's return, heralded by the Messenger. By the conversation of the Priests and the Messenger we are reminded of the background of

‘ ceaseless intrigue, combinations,

In conference, meetings accepted, meetings refused,
Meetings unended or endless

At one place or another in France.’

There are still ‘ the old disputes ’ and the issue of peace or war between Henry and Thomas is uncertain. But Eliot makes no effort to exploit this situation dramatically. Indeed he sets it aside in order to present directly the Four Tempters and the next stage in the action based on history is, dramatically considered, quite arbitrary—the Four Knights simply come to carry out what we have to accept as the wishes of King Henry.

In terms of action, as generally understood, there is no organic or continuous development. Such unity as the play has must be perceived in other ways. Our elementary knowledge of history, that Thomas was in fact killed as a result of a quarrel with Henry II, is subconsciously forming what we see in the play into an integrated whole. Beyond this, however, is there not a deeper and more significant unity—a unity of spiritual purpose and, resulting from this, of tone and atmosphere? It is here I would remind you of the Knights’ Apologia and leave you to argue whether it utterly disrupts and shatters that unity. Does our laughter make us forget all the preceding seriousness? Are we now in the right mood to heed what follows?

Another traditional feature of serious drama is, of course, characterisation. If we ask ourselves what compels interest in plays as diverse as *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, *Hedda Gabler* or *Look Back In Anger*, one common answer may well be that we are drawn into close awareness of the protagonist. Is this equally true of *Murder In The Cathedral*? How much do we

know of Becket as a man? It should be obvious that the answer is 'very little'. Does this matter? Is it a mark of failure in technique? Again our answer must be related to Eliot's purpose. It is no criticism to find fault with a play for not being what it never set out to be. Thomas exists only as the vehicle for the presentation of a spiritual crisis. You may find a few indications (e.g. his sympathy with the Women of Canterbury; his courtesy with the Priests—but also on occasion his angry and resolute opposition to them) of the man within the servant of God. Essentially, however, what we have of Thomas is only that which Eliot's purpose requires. Shakespeare created his hero to the greater glory of man; Eliot to the greater glory of God.

In most plays the dramatist seeks to develop a strong central moment, the 'big scene', which results from the latent dramatic potential of the original situation. Eliot has quite another keystone to the arch of his play. It is the Interlude. This takes the form of the sermon preached by Thomas on Christmas morning, 1170. Here discussion may turn on whether a sermon, however eloquent, can be felt to present the element of inner conflict (and conflict of some kind is indispensable to a major dramatic moment) that the Shakespearean soliloquy perfectly realises. It must also be remembered, when this Interlude is being dramatically considered, that it follows upon the Four Temptations (could the Fourth Temptation be regarded as the crisis of the play?) and the subsequent self-examination by Thomas in soliloquy. By comparison with those tense passages the grave words of the sermon constitute an anticlimax. It is as if Eliot deliberately

introduced this Interlude of relaxed tension so that its principal thought—the nature of martyrdom—should be heeded in quietness and solemnity. That it is rather a suspension of dramatic interest is a criticism legitimate only if made without regard to the original occasion and the peculiar nature of the play.

The disregard for organic development and continuity of the action, for characterisation and for a central peak in the curve of the play must not make us think that Eliot lacks a knowledge of the craft of the dramatist. Quite apart from the masterly shaping of the verse to serve a dramatic end there are many indications that, had such been required, Eliot knows the technicalities of expression in the medium of drama. The Messenger's manner and idiom sharply stand off from the language of the Chorus and of the Priests. To each of the Four Tempters he gives distinctive inflexions in the expression of their proffered inducements. Sharp interchanges (cf. the *stycho-mythia* of classical drama) quicken tension and vary the pace at several points. The telling use of patterned question and answer arrests attention throughout the play. There is, as has already been shown in the commentary on the Knights, delightful exploitation of surprise and incongruity.

We come back, therefore, to the point where this section of our appreciation of the play began. *Murder In The Cathedral* is far from being a play obeying the generally accepted canons of dramatic technique. It seeks an end and uses means which the audience of Sophocles would in essence comprehend better than an audience conditioned only to the 'well made play'

of the nineteenth century or to the drama of social realism of the twentieth. Yet the play has succeeded in the commercial and competitive theatre of our time. Would it have done so, had it not been more than a religious pageant?

Further reading: Sophocles: *Oedipus Rex*; *Oedipus at Colonus*. R. Peacock: *The Art of Drama*.

Questions:

1. 'I wanted to bring home to the audience the contemporary relevance of the situation.' (Eliot). In what different ways does Eliot seek to realize this aim in *Murder in The Cathedral*?

2. Helen Gardner in her book *The Art of T. S. Eliot* makes these statements: (a) 'If in the first act the strife is with shadows, in the second there is no strife at all.'

(b) 'Thomas can hardly be said to be tempted, for the play opens so near its climax that inner development is impossible.'

How far do you find either of these statements to be valid?

3. What features best show Eliot's skill as a dramatic craftsman?

4. Is a poetic drama to be judged by criteria different from those applicable to a play in prose?

5. Which features in the construction or composition of the play seem attributable to the circumstances of the play's origin and to its being first performed in Canterbury Cathedral?

VII. THE CHORUS

It is easy and uncritical to talk of *Murder In The Cathedral* as if it were a modern play written in the form of a Greek tragedy. (Milton's *Samson Agonistes* keeps far more nearly to the pattern of a play by Aeschylus or Sophocles.) There are, however, several features of an ancient Greek drama which find incorporation, though with some modification, in Eliot's play. We will say a word or two about these before considering at greater length the most important constituent of classical drama taken over by Eliot—the Chorus.

As in Greek tragedies the action is single and restricted to the moment of crisis: overtly, it concerns only one protagonist; the unity of place is absolute, and that of time broken by no greater lapse than Aeschylus permits himself in *The Eumenides*. There is a Messenger, though his role is much reduced in *Murder In The Cathedral* by comparison with his function in most Greek plays. As in such typical Greek tragedies as the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus or the *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles, the construction of the play is basically the linking of stasima (the choric passages) and episodes.

The Chorus, however, is taken over by Eliot and used by him on a level of significance which transcends anything found in Greek drama. Looking back on *Murder In The Cathedral* in 1951, Eliot modestly—and rather apologetically—admits depending heavily 'upon the assistance of the chorus'. This was because 'the essential action of the play—both the historical facts

and the matter I invented—was somewhat limited'. And he adds: 'The introduction of a chorus of excited and sometimes hysterical women, reflecting in their emotion the significance of the action, helped wonderfully.' As a poet writing for the first time for the stage, he felt 'much more at home in choral verse than in dramatic dialogue.' Whilst we may accept the wry admission that 'perhaps the dramatic weaknesses would be covered up by the cries of the women', we may also say that in this matter of the Chorus Eliot wrought better than he knew.

For consider what varied and essential purposes the Chorus serves. They mediate between the action and the audience and are, as it were, the articulate voice of the audience. But they are far more than this. They are indispensable to the total dramatic conception. Remember what Eliot says in the extract quoted in the section 'Poetic Drama' about 'a kind of doubleness in the action, as if it took place on two planes at once'. Isn't that exactly what we have here? The Chorus, like Thomas, have their illumination. For all their desire to rest in the familiar and to avoid facing the demands God makes of them, they have been awakened through pity and terror (a masterly extension this of catharsis, i.e. a cleansing of the emotions) to a fuller spiritual life. They have acknowledged their evasion and their sinfulness and through their part in the martyrdom of Thomas they have gone through an 'action' of their own and their 'suffering' (see how these categories are made clearer through the Chorus) has brought them to contrition, but also to praise and thanksgiving.

Almost equal in importance with constituting this

‘action behind the action’ is the function of the Chorus in relation to the central dramatic theme of the nature of martyrdom. Through them, there is made evident the truth of Thomas’s declaration in his sermon that ‘A martyrdom is always the design of God, for His love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring them back to His ways’. Without the Chorus, therefore, this pronouncement would not be dramatically realized and the *total* conception, which is to take the audience into awareness of their involvement in the event of December 29th, 1170, would be partially frustrated. It is largely because of the Chorus that *Murder In The Cathedral* becomes a modern morality play and transcends its historical framework.

One further, if obvious, comment needs to be made about the choric passages. Each is related to its moment in the play. In the first (apart from its fixing the time—

‘Seven years and the summer is over
Seven years since the Archbishop left us’—

and in a single line, ‘He who was always kind to his people’, lighting up the character of Thomas) we are made to feel the imminence of some malady before which they feel helpless. This is intensified in their second stasimon where ‘the doom on the world’ is brought fearfully nearer. After the Temptations they are lost in awful consternation—‘God is leaving us, God is leaving us, more pang, more pain than birth or death’—and can only cry pathetically

‘O Thomas Archbishop, save us, save us, save yourself that we may be saved:

Destroy yourself and we are destroyed.' Their passage at the beginning of Part II emphasizes the symbolism of spring as a renewal of life, but closes in the burden of waiting to those of limited faith. Then follow the three great stasima which sound like a cosmic agony at the coming of the Knights and the killing of Thomas. Finally it is the closing *Te Deum* of the Chorus which regains for the play the liturgical plane and the spiritual atmosphere from which it has been momentarily and incongruously wrenched by the *Apologia* of the Four Knights.

Further reading: T. S. Eliot: Poetry and Drama; The Three Voices of Poetry (*On Poetry and Poets*).

Questions:

1. Criticising the language of the Chorus, one critic writes of 'their ululating logorrhea, doubling and tripling the image, assailing and bewildering the mind with . . . reduplication of epithets.' What justification do you find for this comment on the language of the Chorus?

2. 'The Chorus steals the play.' How far is this a valid or an adverse comment?

3. Compare carefully the function of the Chorus in *Murder In The Cathedral* with that of a Chorus in a Greek play?

4. Write a critical appreciation of any one of the choric passages. (Pay attention to the organization of the material, the tone of the whole and of the sections, the relation of the rhythm to the nature of the passages, the language and imagery.)

5. (a) It has been said that the Chorus is one of the most difficult conventions to establish in modern drama. Why do you think this is so? Or (b) 'All right for a play in a cathedral, but not for a theatre.' What prompts such a comment on the chorus in this play?

VIII. THE VERSE

Look at the following extract from Act V. Scene 2 of Tennyson's *Becket* and compare it with pp. 62-64¹ of Eliot's play which, more or less, deal with the same moment in the story of Thomas.

Fitzurse.

The King beyond the water, thro' our voices,
Commands you to be dutiful and leal
To your young King on this side of the water,
Not scorn him for the foibles of his youth.
What! you would make his coronation void
By cursing those who crown'd him. Out upon you!

Becket.

Reginald, all men know I loved the Prince.
His father gave him to my care, and I
Became his second father: he had his faults,
For which I would have laid my own life down
To help him from them, since indeed I loved him,
And love him next after my lord his father.
Rather than dim the splendour of his crown
I fain would treble and quadruple it
With revenues, realms, and golden provinces
So that were done in equity.

Fitzurse.

You have broken
Your bond of peace, your treaty with the King—
Wakening such brawls and loud disturbances
In England, that he calls you oversea
To answer for it in his Norman courts.

¹ Page references are to the current (4th) edition, Faber, 1938.

Becket.

Prate not of bonds, for never, oh, never again
Shall the waste voice of the bond-breaking sea
Divide me from the mother church of England,
My Canterbury. Loud disturbances!
Oh, ay—the bells rang out even to deafening,
Organ and pipe, and dulcimer, chants and hymns
In all the churches, trumpets in the halls,
Sobs, laughter, cries: they spread their raiment down
Before me—would have made my pathway flowers,
Save that it was mid-winter in the street,
But full mid-summer in those honest hearts.

Fitzurse.

The King commands you to absolve the bishops
Whom you have excommunicated.

Becket.

I?

Not I, the Pope. Ask *him* for absolution.

Fitzurse.

But you advised the Pope.
And so I did.

Becket.

They have but to submit.

The four Knights.

The King commands you.
We are all King's men.

The first thing that strikes you is probably the lack of urgency in Tennyson's verse. There is about it a general lack of tension and therefore of dramatic appropriateness. Can you see what accounts for the

vigour that 'punches over' the Knights's denunciations in Eliot's play? To put it another way: why do Thomas and the Knights (pp. 62-64), though speaking in verse, sustain a sense of actuality and sound like persons of a play, whilst Tennyson's characters sound like reciters of poetry?

First and most important is the difference in the rhythm of the two plays. Tennyson's never beaks free of the debilitating confines of the pentameter. Of course Tennyson varies the distribution of stress in his lines, but there is always felt the dominance of the iambic sequence. To take at random an example of greater power—and naturalness—of Eliot's writing: look at the following:

' You had fled from England, not exiled
Or threatened, mind you; but in the hope
Of stirring up trouble in the French dominions.'
or ' Using every means in your power to evince
The King's faithful servants, every one who trans-
acts
His business in his absence, the business of the
nation.'

In a word: Tennyson's verse is based on a metrical pattern, Eliot's on the cadence of speech—but speech, we must remember, in a dramatic context.

There are, as you will have seen for yourselves, other features to account for difference in quality of the two passages. The archaic 'leal', the faded image, 'dim the splendour of his crown', the romantic antithesis of 'mid-winter in the street. But full mid-summer in those honest hearts'—these are some instances of unconvincing expression in the passage from *Becket*.

Before we go on to some more general remarks about Eliot's verse in *Murder In The Cathedral*. it may be interesting to set two other extracts for comparison. Here is the opening of Act II Scene 1, for which the stage directions are: Rosamund's Bower. A Garden of Flowers. In the midst a bank of wild-flowers with a bench before it. Voices heard singing among the trees. Duet

1. Is it the wind of the dawn that I hear in the pine overhead?

2. No: but the voice of the deep as it hollows the cliffs of the land.

1. Is there a voice coming up with the voice of the deep from the strand,

One coming up with a song in the flush of the glimmering red?

2. Love that is born of the deep coming up with the sun from the sea.

1. Love that can shape or can shatter a life till the life shall have fled?

2. Nay, let us welcome him, Love that can lift up a life from the dead.

1. Keep him away from the lone little isle. Let us be, let us be.

Love that is born of the deep coming up with the sun from the sea.

Now beside it set the opening lines of the Chorus in Part II:

‘ Does the bird sing in the South?

Only the sea-bird cries, driven inland by the storm.

What sign of the spring of the year?

Only the death of the old: not a stir, not a shoot,
not a breath.

Do the days begin to lengthen?

Longer and darker the day, shorter and colder the
night.

Still and stifling the air: but a wind is stored up in
the East.

The starved crow sits in the field, attentive: and in
the wood.

The owl rehearses the hollow note of death.'

In fairness to Tennyson it must be said that his Duet precedes the entry of Henry II and his mistress Rosamund, though Henry is raging against Becket and only half heeds his lover's pleas. Essentially, however, Tennyson's lyrical dialogue is merely decorative: it is not structural to his play. With Eliot the question and answer of the Chorus are directly related to the creation of the atmosphere of tension and apprehension and thus integrated into the drama as a whole.

Perhaps you are thinking that the difference in the verse of these two plays about Becket is attributable simply to the fact that Eliot did not want his lines 'to sound like poetry'. Far from it. In a later lecture (*Poetry and Drama* 1951) it is true that in the light of his plays written after *Murder In The Cathedral* Eliot does contend that, in his view, 'the versification of the dialogue in *Murder In The Cathedral* has only a *negative* merit' and that the aim for poetic drama should be 'to bring poetry into the world in which the audience lives and to which it returns when it leaves the theatre;

not to transport it into some imaginary world totally unlike its own, an unreal world in which poetry is tolerated'. At the time of writing *Murder In The Cathedral*, however, he thought differently. In a Schools Broadcast to Sixth Forms (reproduced in *The Listener*, September 25th, 1936) he said, speaking of naturalism carried to such lengths that characters were 'so extremely life-like that they do not even talk prose': 'So we want to take the opposite direction and not let the audience forget that what they are hearing is verse.'

In the talk referred to above Eliot also said something directly pertinent to the verse of the play we are considering: '(The verse) must be simply relevant to the action which is going forward; but it should also have depths which can only be penetrated by the reader who studies it again and again.' What, then, should we seek to appreciate in the verse of *Murder In The Cathedral*? First, I think, is the unifying harmony that obtains throughout the play. In this oneness we find perfectly blended two elements that at first we may think incompatible—the liturgical and the homely. If we look at the first and second Choruses (particularly the second p. 18), we find the two elements quite easy to distinguish, though never conflicting. In the closing Te Deum they are so completely fused that we may say that the homely has become the liturgical. Here is a passage which illustrates this:

Therefore man, whom Thou hast made to be conscious
of Thee, must consciously praise Thee, in thought
and in word and in deed.

Even with the hand to the broom, the back bent in
laying the fire, the knee bent in the cleaning the
hearth, we, the scrubbers and sweepers of Canter-
bury,

The back bent under toil, the knee bent under sin, the
hands to the face under fear, the head bent under
grief,

Even in us the voices of seasons, the snuffle of winter,
the song of spring, the drone of summer, the
voices of beasts and of birds, praise Thee.

Before we go on to the second important feature of Eliot's verse in this play, the imagery, there is a point which merits an appreciative word in passing. If you have read the play in a group (or, better, taken part in a production of it), you must have realized how easy and natural it is to speak. Whether the lines are for one person only or for the Chorus, they can be spoken without difficulty. Here again Eliot's achievement derives from his theory (partially formulated in his *Dialogue On Dramatic Poetry* (1928) and elaborated later (1951) in his lecture on *Poetry and Drama*) that 'We must find a new form of verse which shall be as satisfactory for us as blank verse was for the Elizabethans.' That is to say that it must be contemporary—in its idiom and in its speech rhythm. As it is phrased in the later pronouncement: 'It must justify itself dramatically, and not merely be fine poetry shaped into a dramatic form.'

What Eliot says above of dramatic poetry in general holds good specifically for the imagery in *Murder In The Cathedral*. It is functional, never merely decorative. It is related to the cycle of the year and that is relevant

to a drama which presents a cycle of spiritual experience. It derives for the most part from the world of nature and for its most dramatic effects from the world of beasts and the creatures of sea and sky. The evil brought in with the Tempters is identified with 'The Lords of Hell' through these lines:

' Sweet and cloying through the dark air
Falls the stifling scent of despair;
The forms take shape in the dark air:
Puss-purr of leopard, footfall of padding bear,
Palm-pat of nodding ape, square hyaena waiting
For laughter, laughter, laughter.'

After the first appearance of the Knights the dramatic tension of their clash with Thomas is at once immeasurably heightened by the Chorus which follows. Corruption and pollution prevail; and the imagery through which this is expressed communicates it to us with intensity because our whole sensibility is quickened because our imaginative, and not merely our intellectual, response is called into play. In this same Chorus one other dramatically significant effect is achieved. The ordered world of nature is, in medieval tradition, an expression of God's will. Here the imagery shows utter disruption of that order—

' I have smelt

Death in the rose, death in the hollyhock, sweet pea,
hyacinth, primrose and cowslip. I have seen

Trunk and horn, tusk and hoof, in odd places '—
and the closing image of ' a pattern of living worms

In the guts of the women of Canterbury '—
reaffirms at an even deeper level that all evil is one and

that we, like the women of Canterbury, are caught in those

‘Rings of light coiling downwards, descending
To the horror of the ape.’

There are many features of Eliot’s technical skill that close reading and a sensitive ear will discover for themselves, but you may find it rewarding to observe how Eliot subtly varies the stresses and the unaccented syllables, how he avoids—even in the simple three-stress lines in which the Chorus rehearse their limited and repetitive life—any monotony of rhythm, how and to what purpose he changes the texture and tempo of his lines.

Eliot’s poetry is a poetry of echoes. *Murder In The Cathedral* is no exception: and it is with this aspect of the work that this examination of the verse must conclude. The echoes or cross-references can conveniently be grouped as internal or external, though, of course, an allusion to something outside the play may be taken up and be used to create its own echoes within the verse. An example of this is the image of the wheel. Used in deepest spiritual significance by Thomas (p. 21), it is anticipated by the Third Priest (p. 18) and used again by Thomas (p. 25). Your own knowledge of the Bible and the Prayer Book should enable you more fully to appreciate religious and liturgical echoes throughout the play.

If you read Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, you cannot fail to detect in *Murder In The Cathedral* parallel or comparable use of symbolism in which the arid or barren earth waits for the spring rain. In *Ash-Wednesday*, a complex poem worth wrestling with as an indication

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of Eliot's development (1930) previous to the writing of the play, are these lines in section III:

'At the first turning of the third stair
Was a slotted window bellied like the fig's fruit
And beyond the hawthorn blossom and a picture
scene

The broadbacked figure drest in blue and green
Enchanted the maytime with an antique flute.'
The First Tempter is not far away.

There is one most surprising echo the detection of which belongs to American research. In 'The Musgrave Ritual' (*The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*) Conan Doyle introduces the 'strange catechism to which each Musgrave had to submit when he came to man's estate'. The catechism has reference to a treasure which proves to be the lost crown of Charles I. Here it is:

Whose was it?
His who is gone.
Who shall have it?
He who will come.
What was the month?
The sixth from the first.
Where was the sun?
Over the oak.
Where was the shadow?
Under the elm.
How was it stepped?
North by ten and by ten, east by five and by five,
south by two and by two, west by one and by
one, and so under.

What shall we give for it?

All that is ours.

Why should we give it?

For the sake of the trust.

Now look at part of the dialogue of Thomas and the Second Tempter (p. 28). When we recollect that the argument is about secular power, of which a crown is a symbol, we can see that Eliot's use of the Musgrave catechism is far from being merely a literary acrostic. As always, echoes in Eliot's poetry are purposive.

To round off this section here are two quotations, both of which underline Eliot's achievement in the verse of *Murder In The Cathedral*. The first is from Coleridge: 'As far as metre acts in and for itself, it tends to increase the vivacity and susceptibility both of the general feelings and of the attention.'

The second is from Eliot: 'For I start with the assumption that if poetry is merely a decoration, an added embellishment, if it merely gives people of literary tastes the pleasure of listening to poetry at the same time that they are witnessing a play, then it is superfluous. It must justify itself dramatically, and not merely be fine poetry shaped into dramatic form.'

Further reading. Helen Gardner: *The Art of T. S. Eliot*.

Questions:

1. What pitfalls do you think beset the writer of choric verse and how has Eliot sought to avoid them?
2. Compare closely any two of the Tempters' exchanges with Thomas and show how the verse serves to characterize the speakers.

3. Show carefully how much the verse of *Murder In The Cathedral* owes to the Bible and the liturgy of the Church.

4. Account for the failure of Tennyson's *Becket* as a verse play.

GENERAL

Few writers can have been the subject of so many books about them in their own lifetime. The student is best advised to gain a general picture of Eliot's work from *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* by F. O. Matthiessen and then to address himself seriously to the writings of Eliot himself. For help with such poems as he finds beyond his immediate comprehension he can turn to *New Bearings in English Poetry*, by F. R. Leavis or to a more specialized study of Eliot's poetry such as D. E. S. Maxwell's *The Poetry of T. S. Eliot*. If he becomes interested in the range of Eliot's scholarship and the diversity of the sources of Eliot's allusions, he will find Grover Smith's *T. S. Eliot: Poetry and Plays* a fascinating book, as exhaustive as it may prove exhausting. D. E. Jones has written specifically on the plays (*The Plays of T. S. Eliot*).

In *T. S. Eliot: A Symposium for his Seventieth Birthday* (ed. N. Braybrooke) there are interesting contributions from E. Martin Browne (From *The Rock* to *The Confidential Clerk*) and Robert Speaight (*Interpreting Becket and other parts*). In the same symposium is an account by the producer, George Hoellering, of the making of the film version of the play. See this film if you can (Eliot speaks on the sound-track the words of the Fourth Tempter).¹ The film version of the play has been published (Faber 1952) with prefaces by Eliot and Hoellering. This is a different text with new scenes specially written for the film.

¹ The film can be hired from Connoisseur Films, Ltd., Renown House, 54-58 Wardour Street, London, W.1.

Since *Murder In The Cathedral* Eliot has written four plays: *The Family Reunion* (1939), *The Cocktail Party* (1950), *The Confidential Clerk* (1954) and *The Elder Statesman* (1959). Through all four Eliot is seeking to use situations and characters of contemporary society as dramatic means to spiritual and philosophical ends. They are plays in which he is exploring verse as a dramatic medium for the theatre and its audience in the present day. To appreciate why the verse in these plays is so different from that of *Murder In The Cathedral* you should read Eliot's lectures 'Poetry and Drama' and 'The Three Voices of Poetry' (*On Poetry and Poets*).

Some indication of the standpoint of Eliot as a literary critic and as a thoughtful and independent commentator on contemporary society can be found in the Penguin book *T. S. Eliot: Selected Prose*, but the student should make himself familiar with the books from which the extracts are taken.





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